FLOYD GIBBONS

KNIGHT OF THE AIR

By DOUGLAS GILBERT

Introduction by

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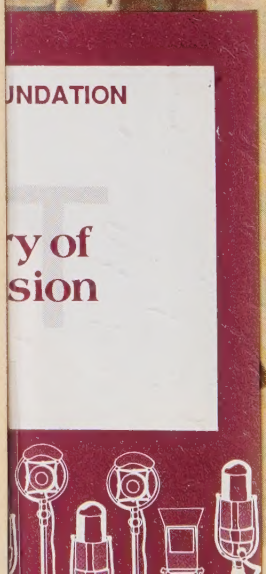

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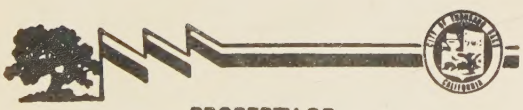

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By DOUGLAS GILBERT

Edited by
BURTON RASCOE

Introduction by
FLOYD GIBBONS

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FLOYD GIBBONS

KNIGHT OF THE AIR

FLOYD GIBBONS SPEAKING!

Hello, Everybody!

I have just been reading the introduction my old pal, Burton Rascoe, has written for this little book and, oh, my, was I flattered! Burton is one of these boys who can use a lot of nine dollar words and train them tricks and make them sit right up and bark. Well, he's let loose his vocabulary on me and sized me up as quite some guy. I am beginning to believe all Burton says about me and I am thinking of making Kenneth MacGregor, Larry Rue, and Ed Thorgersen call me "Mister."

What got me, though, in reading that piece of Burton's was his bringing up the old days when he and I were on the Chicago Tribune back in the days before the war. Believe me that was some staff. We all slaved and sweated and broke our backs for almost no pay at all and, why? Why, I'll tell you: there was the old spirit of the game on that paper in those days. Walter Howey was a slave-driver and the hardest man to squeeze a raise out of that ever held

down a desk. But he was an Inspiration, with a capital I, I want to tell you. There was something in the man that made every reporter want to give his best to the paper and realize that by giving his best to the newspaper he was giving the best to himself—to his own future career. Howey could write and he encouraged writing. Little masterpieces of literature chronicling minor local happenings in Chicago lie buried in the files of the Tribune of that period. Howey was never the sort to bawl out a reporter. If a reporter failed to make good on a story, he knew it was not the reporter's fault and always said, "Better luck, next time, old scout." And if the reporter did make good nobody could be warmer and more sincere in praise than Howey. That was what made the spirit of the paper.

Every member of that underpaid staff has made good in one way or another. Some have gone into business and got rich; some have become editors; some have gone into the motion pictures; some have become novelists and short story writers; and some have remained in newspaper work. The best of the whole gang, the hero of the whole staff, however, is dead. I refer to John ("Jack") Lawson who was accidentally killed right at the height of his career

as a reporter and just when he was beginning to branch into the field of fiction.

Well, if I got to talking about that old gang on the Tribune I'd never finish this little piece or do my daily spiel over the radio. But, boy, this reminds me that there is nothing like old friends getting together and swapping reminiscences of the old days. When we do that all the world seems a better place to live in—a friendlier, kindlier world.

Hello! My time's about up. If you will tune in tonight at six-forty-five New York time or eleven-forty-five for the West coast hook-up, I'll try to have some live news for you. And until then,—I hope you have a nice quiet evening home with a book—this book.

FLOYD GIBBONS.

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT FLOYD GIBBONS

By Burton Rascoe

BACK in 1912 when I was attending the University of Chicago and working on the reporting staff of the Chicago Tribune, a hulking young fellow came into the office one day and applied for a job. His name was Gibbons, Floyd Gibbons, and he had been working on a Socialist paper which had suddenly folded up. Reporters never have any money, no matter how much their salary is, and reporters on a Socialist daily have even less than other reporters. This Gibbons had been on his uppers for some time. He hadn't shaved for a day or two and he looked like a bum. His clothes were a fright—unpressed and greasy as anything. His old boss on the Socialist paper was head of the copy-desk on the Tribune then and he got Gibbons a job. Gibbons asked for a salary advance —which wasn't much—and went out to get himself cleaned up and to buy himself a suit

proper to his status as a reporter for a big metropolitan newspaper. He went to a barber and to a Turkish bath and then went shopping for some clothes. He had very little money left after his hair-cut, shave, and bath, and the only place he could get a suit and haberdashery within his means was in one of those gentleman's furnishing establishments on South Clark street where the clerks stand out on the sidewalk and grab pedestrians by the arm and try to shove them into the store. Gibbons emerged from this ordeal with the gosh-awfullest suit I ever saw on a human being outside of a burlesque house. He looked as though he were made up for a "straight" part in a low comedy duo. His suit was a gray one with checks. They were the largest checks you can imagine. They were about the size of window-panes. How he got the trousers on has always been a mystery to me. They fitted him so tight that they looked as though they had been pasted on him. Nevertheless, he wore this preposterous suit with an air.

Gibbons has an air.

He could, and often does, wear any sort of costume and when he does, he has an air. It is a negligent and yet perfect air. In khaki uni-

form, with Sam Browne belt and military cap, tilted slightly over his eye, he has the precision of General Pershing with the dashing nonchalance of General Douglas MacArthur, who was the first West Point Commander to take the steel circle out of the cap and let the cap have a roguish tilt. Just that touch of sloppiness which breaks the awful symmetry of regulation dress.

It may sound curious to you for me to dwell so much on Gibbons' clothes, but if you follow me to the end, I think the discussion will have some point. Not long ago, General Vanderbilt asked Gibbons to take a cruise on his yacht. Gibbons accepted the invitation; but his secretary had to remind him that, although he had in his wardrobe the robes and turban in which he had been clothed for his audience with King Ammanuk of Timbuctoo, an aviator's outfit with parachute, full dress with swallow tails, military uniforms and ordinary mufti, he had no clothes proper to a yachting cruise. She suggested that Gibbons go shopping. He called up a chap who runs a column on a magazine about What the Well Dressed Man Should Wear and asked him what sort of outfit one ought to have to go on a yachting party. He got the de-

tails, and went out and did himself grand. He bought a Panama hat, white silk shirts, black bow tie, a double-breasted blue coat, white duck trousers, canvas shoes with fiberoid soles.

On Saturday night he worked very late and on Sunday morning when General Vanderbilt's car came around to take him down to the dock, Gibbons was dressed and planning out his Monday broadcast. He was dressed, but he was dressed in the clothes he usually wears, a rumpled light gray suit, durable and honest shoes with hard heels which do not meet so well with the varnished woodwork of a yacht's deck, and a shirt which had withstood the night's heat and was really ready for the wash-hamper. Pre-occupied with his broadcasting work he dashed out of the apartment and got into General Vanderbilt's car. When the automobile reached the dock it suddenly occurred to him that he had forgotten to put on the yachting uniform he had been at so much pains to acquire. It was too late. A few days later he was asked to make a talk at a benefit performance of stage stars for the Green Room Club, a club for actors. Gibbons wore his yachting outfit on that occasion. When he first came on the stage a lot of people thought he was

Admiral Byrd. That is, they thought so until he began talking. There is no one in the world who can talk like Floyd Gibbons. He speaks at a maximum speed of 245 words a minute and at an average speed of 216 words a minute and every word is clearly pronounced, completely enunciated, readily understood. He dramatizes his speech, just as he dramatizes the news.

And the essence of that dramatization is virility. A virility that is simple, honest, direct, homely and ingenuous. And these are qualities which are somehow typical of America. I do not say that all Americans possess them or that even a vast majority of Americans possess them. But most of the lads from hills and farms and small towns—not only of the Middle-West but of the New England states and of the South, the prairies and the ranch lands, the lumber camps of the Northwest and the fruit lands of California—whatever were their racial strains, who went overseas in the World War, possessed these qualities. They are part of the qualities of our national heritage—a heritage of forthrightness, common sense, courage, and the spirit of adventure.

If I recall to your mind our first great national philosopher, Benjamin Franklin, perhaps

I may make my meaning clear. Guileless and somewhat uncouth in dress, wearing a coon-skin cap at state functions where the most mannered diplomats of Europe foregathered, Franklin, as United States Ambassador to France, charmed all Europe. The man's simplicity conquered all of the subtleties of the French court. His speech was simple; but his brain was alive. He might have looked somewhat like a bumpkin, but nothing escaped him. In the same way, a homely, gum-chewing, unlettered American cowboy, Will Rogers, has become the most-quoted man of our time, not only by Americans but by foreign princes and statesmen.

Floyd Gibbons typifies some of these qualities which are characteristically American. John T. McCutcheon, the famous cartoonist on the Chicago Tribune, and with Gibbons also a world famous war correspondent, is another example of the sort of embodied Americanism I mean. There is probably no person living who has had more exciting adventures than McCutcheon—not even Gibbons—for McCutcheon has hunted lions in Africa with Roosevelt; he was on the dispatch boat *McCulloch* in Manila Bay when Dewey won his famous naval battle; he explored Siam, Cochin-China, Burma and India;

he joined the Boers as war correspondent in the Transvaal; he was with the Belgian and German armies in 1914 as war correspondent and with the French army in France, Saloniki, and the Balkans; he knows or knew nearly every crowned head, nobleman, statesman and military man in Europe; he has sailed the Spanish Main in his own sloop; and he owns Treasure Island. And yet, as James Montgomery Flagg once said of him, although he has been almost everywhere and seen almost everything and known almost everybody, he still looks like Bird Center. It is American simplicity, absence of affectation, shrewdness and virility of which I have been speaking that make McCutcheon and Gibbons typical Americans.

Gibbons has had experiences which make the famous Message to Garcia sound like a ride on a Fifth avenue bus. He was with Villa in Mexico as a war correspondent at the time when that bandit general cared so little for human life and so little for American feelings that being a war correspondent attached to his forces was almost as ticklish as being let loose in a den of rattlesnakes. It is believed that Villa ordered the execution of Ambrose Bierce, a famous American short story writer and news-

paperman, on some trifling pretext. Gibbons later accompanied General Pershing on the latter's expedition into Mexico in search of Villa. Gibbons was ordered to France as a war correspondent by the Chicago Tribune and he took the *S. S. Laconia*, at the time when the German admiralty was launching its unremitting submarine warfare on ships bound for allied ports. Gibbons' newspaper had arranged for him to take passage upon the same ship carrying the recalled German ambassador, Von Bernsdorff; but Gibbons declined to take passage on that ship: he wanted to be on a ship which might be torpedoed. The *Laconia* was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland and a number of Americans lost their lives. After being tossed about in a small boat all night in a rough sea, Gibbons was rescued and immediately upon landing he rushed to a cable office and wired a 4,000-word story of the disaster. This story has become one of the classics of reporting. As a war correspondent in France he was wounded at the Battle of Chateau-Thierry, losing the sight of one eye. He has flown in aeroplanes over the greater part of Europe, North Africa, Asia Minor and even to the Gobi desert in search of news. He has the French and Italian Croix de Guerre with palm

and is a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor. And he is still pretty much the same sort of Floyd Gibbons he was when he came down from Milwaukee looking like a dock-walloper and whose idea of clothes was something with loud checks in them.

When Gibbons came to work on the Chicago Tribune, that paper had, I believe, the best staff of any newspaper in the country and it was by way of justifying its reputation as the World's Greatest Newspaper. Certainly no other newspaper of the time could boast of better writing than was to be found in the columns of the Tribune. That, of course, was in the days before the European war had made foreign news as important as it is today. Local news then, on the Chicago Tribune, was of primary importance. For city editor we had Walter Howey, who is to my mind the keenest "news" man as well as one of the most brilliant reporters of our time. Howey's great dramatic sense, his mental alertness and resourcefulness when a big news story is breaking, his fervid loyalty to the newspaper game, as a game, have been caricatured fondly by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur in "The Front Page." Acting as a perfect governor to Howey's exuberance and

tendency to get the last ounce of "human interest," even to the point of melodrama, out of a big story was E. S. Beck, managing editor, a quiet, cultured, accurate, precise man with a university education and a great sense of responsibility toward the readers of the newspaper in the matter of accuracy, fairness, dependability. On this staff there were Lucian Carey, now a short story writer; Walter Noble Burns, author of "Billy, the Kid"; John Lovett; George T. Bye, now an author's agent; Terry Ramsaye, author of "A History of the Motion Picture" and editor for Pathé films; Sheppard Butler, editor of Liberty; Mark Watson, formerly editor of the Ladies' Home Journal; Ring Lardner, Percy Hammond, Walter Eckersall, John Lawson, Robert Rohde, and others who were later to make their names known as magazine writers, scenarists, novelists and so forth.

Gibbons, after his newspaper experience in Milwaukee, fitted into this staff perfectly. But at first he was merely a good news man. He had not caught from the infectious Howey that ability to give drama and distinction to a record of daily happenings in a large, tumultuous and heterogeneous city. But also he was not to be stampeded into acquiring that knack at the ex-

pense of facts. Once he was assigned to a murder case. A young bandit, with a reputation for fearlessness and daring who had a number of police killings to his infamy and who had terrorized the west side, was found murdered in his flat. There were, as usual, no clues as to the murderer and it was only after several days that the identity of the bandit's sweetheart was established and the girl was taken into custody and questioned concerning the murder. In the presence of Gibbons and of several other reporters she was given a mild form of the third degree and locked up for the night. Gibbons saw the girl put into her cell, talked to the police matron and to the girl herself and returned to the newspaper office to write his story.

When he turned his story over to the night city editor, that gentleman had one of those fantastic seizures of exasperation which sometimes overcomes an editorial functionary who imagines that one of his reporters has fallen down on the job. Gibbons had turned in, too late for the first edition, a story about the apprehension and questioning of the bandit's sweetheart and in that story there was no mention of the fact that the girl had confessed to the murder. The night city editor, an hour or

so before, had sent to press a detailed and thrilling confession which had come from the City Press through the pneumatic tubes. (The City Press Association in Chicago is a newsgathering organization furnishing local news to all subscribing newspapers impartially, somewhat in function like the Associated Press.) The night city editor, after reading Gibbons' story, proceeded to bawl him out before the whole staff, not directly, but in that sarcastic third-person manner which is all the more humiliating. His tirade ran somewhat as follows:

"Here, Durkin! (Durkin was head office boy.) Call up the City Press, will you, and tell them to send over one of their fifteen-dollar-a-week reporters. Just any one—it doesn't make any difference. I want to give him a job in the place of one of these high-priced prima donnas who always fall down on every important story because their idea of getting a story is playing poker over at the Press club. Just any fifteen-dollar-a-week City Press reporter can be depended on to be at the police station when a big story breaks there, but your prima donnas can't be expected to belittle themselves by entering a police station."

Gibbons, knowing he was being slated, mildly inquired, "What's wrong with my story?"

"What's wrong with it!" exploded the night city editor. "What's wrong with it! When did you wake up? When did you write this story, last week? We're running a daily newspaper, not a high school course in English composition. Here's what I think of your little exercise (and he tore up Gibbons' story and dropped it on the floor). You big saphead, don't you know the girl confessed? We've got the story in type; it will be off the press in a minute. A City Press story, too. And a damned good one."

"The girl didn't confess," replied Gibbons. "The story is just as I have written it."

"But we've got the confession—all the details. Why don't you get yourself a job driving a truck or something. You'll never be a newspaper man."

"All right," answered Gibbons. "Have it your way. Run the confession. There wasn't any confession." He put on his hat and started out the door. "But when you find it out, I am not going to rewrite my story for you."

The first edition came out with the confession loudly displayed on the first page. Half an hour later a flash came from the City Press tell-

ing all newspapers to "kill" the confession story. It turned out that a reporter for the City Press had got sore at his editor, had gone out and got very drunk, had returned and written the fictitious confession and had turned it in as a gesture of revenge before quitting and asking for his pay.

Needless to say, Gibbons was reinstated with honor and the night city editor was properly humbled. From then on Gibbons pursued his career as a newspaper man with the same fidelity to accuracy of statement in recording news. But with his development as a newspaper man there developed also his marked ability to dramatize events. He sought adventure in the hardest assignments, assignments that meant suffering, danger, even possible death. He shrank from no opportunity to be in the thick of the news when it was happening. His own excitement he has been able to convey in his news stories; and this excitement he has been able to convey to the millions to whom he talks daily over the radio.

* * * *

The secrets of Gibbons' success as one of the greatest features developed by radio are, I believe, these:

1. He is positive, articulate, dynamic. He is impressive. He commands attention. He conveys to his audience something of his own exuberance, his own vitality, his own aliveness to life.

2. He has a superb news sense. This must be explained. A news sense is really a sense of what is important, what is vital, what has color and life, what people are interested in. I believe it is a natal gift but even as a natal gift it can be perfected by experience and training. I have seen city editors who could go through five typewritten sheets of a news story in ten seconds or less and not only tell you what is in those five sheets but, if you were a reporter and had buried the most important feature of your story in a sentence on page four, they could tell you in another five seconds how to rewrite your story, making that feature the "lead." I have known other people who do not know what is in a newspaper story after having carefully read it with a maximum of time. Indeed, I know men with a reputation for learning who can read a book two or three times and get an entirely wrong idea of what it is about.

3. He speaks the language of the common man. With a humility that is not at all feigned,

Gibbons professes himself, in his radio talks, quite unable to pronounce with the proper accent those foreign words which he is sometimes called upon to pronounce. With a proper humility also, he apologizes for the use of "four-dollar words" when he is called upon to use them. His own speech is idiomatic, concise, staccato. He uses the shortest and the most familiar words possible. And by doing so he is completely articulate.

4. He is masculine. He is a relief from the crooners. And he is a relief also from the winsome, sentimental sort of jolly-good-fellows one hears so often over the radio. He is a newsman, with a message to put over in the shortest possible time, and there is no opportunity for him to goose-grease his followers.

* * * *

Gibbons usually arises somewhere between eleven o'clock in the morning and noon in a hotel suite, the large living room of which is his workshop. When he has bathed, shaved and had his breakfast, part of his staff has already accomplished some of the preliminary work for him. His chief assistant has read and marked all the morning newspapers, selecting not only the stories Gibbons is likely to find worthy of

mentioning in his talk but the important items in each story. His secretary has mapped out his day for him, arranged all of his appointments, kept away from him the nuisances who always pester celebrities, arranged his important mail, got everything in order for the functioning of the human dynamo.

After breakfast he consults with his secretary, dictates letters, signs letters, autographs books, looks over the news stories marked for him. At two o'clock he is in the Literary Digest office for a conference which lasts usually half an hour or an hour. By three o'clock he is back in his hotel suite. From then on until 6:15 P. M., he is at work preparing his talk. Every edition of the afternoon newspapers is brought to him; press bulletins are delivered; telephone and radio "tips" are relayed to him. Out of this mass of material he composes and dictates about 4,000 words embracing all of the high points of the news of the day up to the last minute—which is to say, 6:30 P. M., Daylight Saving time, New York City. When this task is finished a battery of typists is called into action to make copies of the completed manuscript.

Gibbons then takes a taxicab to the National Broadcasting Company's office on Fifth avenue.

There he has a private room where he rehearses his talk. One copy he reads. Another copy is held by Richard Duffy of the Literary Digest who corrects any serious errors of pronunciation or any slips in facts or "editorializing." Another copy is held by the production man, Kenneth MacGregor, who knows exactly how fast Gibbons is speaking and who, with a stop-watch in his hand, is able to tell Gibbons exactly how many words he will have to cut out of his talk to make it begin and end precisely at the time allotted him.

The excisions and corrections in Gibbons' text are made with lightning rapidity. The timer says, "120 lines," and with blue pencil Gibbons runs through his copy striking out lines and counting as he goes until the required number of lines are out. Duffy suggests a few changes, sometimes for the sake of cadence or emphasis, and Gibbons replies, "O. K. Duff!" and underlines a word or crosses out a word and puts in a new one.

A minute or two later, in shirt sleeves, he is before the microphone in the broadcasting room. Edward Thorgersen, the announcer, introduces Gibbons as the "Headline Hunter" and the machine gun-like discourse of Gibbons begins.

It is a discourse that is instinctively "timed" with the accuracy of a trained speaker or actor. However fast Gibbons talks, nothing is blurred, nothing is indistinct.

When he has finished, he has used up so much energy that he is temporarily exhausted. He goes back to his hotel, rests a while and has dinner. After dinner he takes a nap—unless he has a 9:15 broadcast and springs up from his rest just in time to catch a taxi to the NBC offices for an 11:45 broadcast.

When he returns he permits himself some relaxation. Perhaps his old friends, Correll and Gosden (Amos 'n' Andy) come in, or some newspaper friends and there is companionship and hilarity and yarn-swapping.

But after guests have gone Gibbons goes to work again. He may work until six o'clock in the morning. And, after an hour's sleep, he may dash off to the Teeterboro airport or to Curtiss Field to do some broadcasting stunt from the air.

And yet the fellow has an ability to compose himself and to listen quietly and concentratedly to a detailed exposition of some scientific discovery and to grasp the exposition so well that ten minutes afterwards he is able to explain the

essentials in words almost anyone can understand.

Gibbons is a newsman, expositor, entertainer.

Having introduced him thus sketchily I turn him over to the interviewer, who follows me. . . . Here they are!

CHAPTER I

From News Writer to News Broadcaster

GET ready, you're moving!"

Action words. Where? The cable's terse staccato didn't say.

Maybe Timbuctoo, Nome, Sydney, Kamchatka. The Chicago Tribune wasn't fussy where they ordered their Paris office head. Floyd didn't give a damn either—then.

"Keep this guy Gibbons moving" seemed to be standing staff instructions back in Chicago. And Gibbons, for the last decade of his twenty years as a newspaper man, had toed the mark. Had poised like a runner awaiting a cable that would launch him toward desert, jungle or icefloe.

But "this guy Gibbons" decided, one noon in 1928 as he was barging his six feet of height, 190 pounds of heft jauntily into the National Broadcasting Company building at 711 Fifth avenue, New York City, that cables would never mean a thing to him any more.

At 40 he was through with roving; with punching a portable in some French billet; with toting bags; with natives poling up the Niger; sheiking in the Sahara; sniffing at the stink of a Singapore hop joint; stalking diplomats at star chamber sessions as they plotted destinies of dynasties.

"The Red Napoleon," his last book, was well under way, its manuscript nearly complete. It was a prophecy of the next world war and the part radio was to play in it. He needed information. Obviously, the man to see was M. H. Aylesworth, president of the National Broadcasting Company.

Having obtained his technical data, he could finish his book, loaf through its royalties, seclude himself in his hotel and maybe write another book when he had to.

Stabilized, settled, comfortably parked, he could exploit his adventures for friends before the fire; or continue to dole them out at so much a word—when the financial pinch prodded him—for publishers camping on his doorstep for copy.

So he swung into an elevator, shot to the fifteenth floor, entered Aylesworth's office and got a load of the accurate information Ayles-

worth carries under his hat, and—left a decided imprint of a personality as dynamic as the power stations that now hurtle his words to a score or so million of listeners.

They went to lunch. Aylesworth's conversational contacts bristled, absorbing the high power energy discharged by this human dynamo. The talk veered from the static of radio technicalities to the clearer, more interesting transmission of radio personalities.

Most of the time the NBC chief, one of the nation's greatest "professional" listeners, kept his peace. But his brain was filing away memoranda of Gibbons' rapid-fire "broadcast" of the high spots of a hectic life.

They parted. Aylesworth went back to his office. A super-showman, the man that was to pick Freeman F. Gosden and Charles J. Correll —Amos 'n' Andy—as aces of the air wasn't overlooking any bets with another potential winner.

And Gibbons, with his scientific data, went back to his book and his dreams of an idle, literary life. He finished the book. But the fancies still run—on the air—for out of that luncheon developed the "Headline Hunter" and the "Prohibition Poller" and news gatherer

that makes the Literary Digest's fifteen minutes over WJZ a radio "front page."

At 40 through with roving? Today at 42 he's just begun—roaming for fifteen-million persons —their vicarious vagabond of the air, satisfying the gypsy lust of those of us who have never traveled.

He's radio's knight errant; the listener's passport to uncharted harbors; their open sesame to Cathay; their vista of a world whose only boundaries are the poles. The magic of his tales make fireplace dreams come true.

Through him they hear the basso grunts of the trolls in the halls of the mountain kings; peer with him at the sheen of the sunshine silvering ice cap floes; see the finger of a hula crooner twanging a uke as she beckons from Waikiki; hear the adenoidal "Aaaaaaaaaa" of a muezzin calling upon Allah from a desert tower.

"Wait a minute!" said Gibbons, lunging his bulk across the table to peer at these notes, "Knight errant? You mean 'radio's night error.'"

"That's a hot one," said Ed Thorgersen, his announcer, "why don't you use it some night?"

"I did," said Gibbons, "but its illustration

was too effective. I bounced into the stage traps of the Great Northern Railway parked in the studio here one night, set train whistles blowing, engine bells ringing and all but ruined four or five programs. It was the first time I ever ran into a train on Fifth avenue—and the last, a couple of production men told me."

It was a mess that he could well laugh off now. But it was a vivid reminder in the clash of its circumstances of another studio appearance, his first, when, in a test before an unseen audience of Aylesworth and other NBC officials he broadcast for the first time what to him was his most exciting experience.

And this is how that story went:—

Lights screened, steaming cautiously at fifteen knots, the Cunarder *Laconia*, carrying 289 passengers and crew on February 25, 1917, entered the submarine blockade zone off the Irish coast laid down by the "Imperial" German government.

A foursome of bridge went idly on in the smoking room. It was 10:30 P. M. and most of the passengers had retired. A few, muffled in great coats, peered into the murk of the night that was met at the horizon by the swells of the sea.

"What do you think the chances are of us being torpedoed?" asked Gibbons, one of the four players.

He had been assigned by his newspaper to their London office. Germany's unrelenting submarine policy had tautened the nerves of this nation. Washington fidgeted behind official panelled doors.

President Wilson had said that an "overt act" would mean—well, what it has meant—60,000 odd crosses marking shrines at Chateau-Thierry, the Argonne, St. Mihiel—meccas today for almost as many gold star mothers.

"Well," said a monocled Britisher, lighting a cigaret, "I should say about 4,000 to 1."

He passed the light around. Gibbons drew on his cigaret, a third offered his own unlit "fag" for a light.

"Three on a match is bad luck," observed one of the four, feigning a laugh.

"It's O. K. with me," said the lad who made the third. He was a Canadian flier, his wounds healed, returning to the front. "I've done it before. The other two boys are gone."

"Gee, maybe it's to be us two," remarked the Britisher facing Gibbons.

They turned to their cards. The hand was

never played out. They might have been on a ferry warping into a slip. You know the jolt as she first hits the spires of a stringpiece. That's the way it felt. A slight lurch, then a stumbling, crunching movement, then a pause, and for an instant, silence.

Recovered from their moment's transfixion, the quartet shot into action.

"We're hit!" shouted one, and they dashed through the corridor, their pace halted by the listing of the vessel. Ominous, eerie, the *Laconia's* whistle bellowed the terror all were sensing—five quick blasts—abandon ship.

"The list of the ship increased," Gibbons recounted. "Boat No. 10 was loading up and men and boys were busy with ropes. By this time all of us had adjusted our life preservers. The quick, sharp bark of the officers crying orders accented the silence. There was little confusion.

"I guess we were all too scared to cry out, except for one woman, a blonde French actress. Hysterically screaming, she was lifted up by two men and placed in a lifeboat."

The ropes caught when they were lowered and Gibbons described the agony of the attempted launching of the boat he was in as

almost as intense as the night before them—black, compassless, comfortless.

Without an officer, the twenty-three persons in the boat huddled together, shivering more from fear than exposure to a wintry night on the North Atlantic in an open boat.

Gibbons, sighting a passenger he knew to be an old sea captain, prevailed upon the man to take charge.

The old sea dog responded, but had almost lost the use of his voice. It was stipulated that he was to give orders to Gibbons, who was to bawl them out to the other passengers. The seating arrangements were organized, oars doled out to the proper balance and some semblance of precision maintained so that the small boat would not be capsized by the first swell.

Meantime, off their port bow the *Laconia*, careening badly now, stood out in the bleak night, its murky lights revealing what a derelict she had become.

"It was about a half hour after we heard the report of the first torpedo that we heard another dull thud," said Gibbons. "The German submarine had dispatched another torpedo. This

time it penetrated the vitals of the ship, directly into the engine room.

"We watched silently during the next minute as the *Laconia's* tiers of lights dimmed slowly from white to yellow, then to red. And then nothing was left, nothing but the shroud of the night which hung over us like a pall."

The passengers settled into that frightful, nervous, apprehension that is the poignant terror of the semi-saved.

"We steadied the boat's head into the wind," Gibbons continued, "and a black hulk moved toward us and stopped about ten feet away. It was the 'sub.'

"Vot ship vass dot?" asked an officer in throaty, guttural dialect, poking his head up through the conning tower.

"The *Laconia*," someone shouted.

He didn't hear and the answer was repeated.

"Vot did she weigh?"

"Eighteen thousand tons."

"Any passengers?"

"Seventy-three," they replied, "many of them women and children—some of them in this boat, over 200 in the crew."

"Any cargo?"

"Yes."

"Iss der Captain in your boat?"

"No."

"Vell, I guess you be all right. A patrol will pick you up some time soon." And the U-boat moved off.

Then began the siege between the twenty-three souls in the boat and the elements.

"Hours passed," said Gibbons. "We bailed constantly. Most of us were wet to the knees and shivering from the weakening effects of the icy water. Our hands were blistered from pulling at the oars. Our stomachs ached from vain retching. We had only sea biscuit to eat."

And then the first feverish joy. Some one had sighted a light.

"That nodding finger of light was a blessed beacon that beamed like the Christmas star to the wise men," said Gibbons. "Finally, its green and red sidelights flashing, it headed for our direction.

"It seemed ages before the vessel, a British mine sweeper, could maneuver herself so as to take us aboard. She had picked up other boats of the *Laconia*. The reunions, the rejoicing, were marvellous. The tales of individual rescues were still ringing when we crept into Queenstown."

Leaving his happy mates talking together, Floyd hurried to a cable office. His 4,000-word story filed for the Chicago Tribune was syndicated to hundreds of other newspapers.

Gibbons had had a hunch, a newspaper man's hunch when he took the *Laconia*. He had been ordered to France as war correspondent. He refused to go on the ship on which Von Bernsdorff was sailing because he knew no harm would come to that ship from the Germans. He chose the *Laconia*, having a hunch she would be sunk and that he would escape and file a story of the sinking.

CHAPTER II

A Broadcast and How Gibbons Lost His Eye

6:44 P. M. WJZ—One minute to go.

Heavy, insulated, a doodad for a door-knob, the "ice box" door of studio "G" of the NBC greets you with an ominous "ON THE AIR" at the end of a tortuous, cork-floored corridor.

A uniformed page swings open the portal at the tread of hastening steps. His face lights up.

"Mr. Gibbons." The lad chokes it out—blushes betray an hour's futile practice.

"H'lo kid." A smile, a wave, and Gibbons breezes in, his huge bulk framed in a light gray suit, his soft hat pegged at its customary cock-sure angle. The linen oval patch shielding his left eye-socket glistens whiter against a ruddy face.

He pushes on, his coat brushing the ivories of a grand piano impeding the fairway that

leads to the microphone table. Studio drapes rustle in the wake of his progress.

Nervous jerks help shed his coat. It is tossed on a chair as he lunges into another chair before the table. He sucks deeply on a cigaret, chest muscles tautening his vest, and exhales. The gray cloud blurs a framed sign whose letters hide impotently "No Smoking."

He leans toward the "mike," his torso outspanning the back of his chair by six inches on either side. He shoots a quick glance over his shoulder at a studio visitor. The full lips of a rugged "ringside" face curl into a friendly smile foiling the glint of his one blue eye.

Ed Thorgersen, announcer, fidgets with the gadgets of an indicator whose tiny red and green lights signal in radio technique the imminent broadcast through to the Mississippi.

At one end of the table to Gibbons' right Kenneth MacGregor, production man, fingers his copy of the 3,000-word script that Gibbons is to fling out into the air at machine-gun speed for the Literary Digest. Two hundred and seventeen words a minute is Gibbons' gait, never equalled, say broadcast officials, by any other man except at tremendous sacrifice of clarity.

MacGregor saws through a sentence with a pencil.

"You Scotch chiseller, what are you cutting that out for?" booms Floyd.

"Have to watch it, Floyd. It looks overtime to me."

"But what the hell—that's color, man. I can pack it in, and then—" O. K., "it's out." . . .

His hamlike hand moves beyond his reading script for the glorified cigar box that is the table "mike." Draws it forward a foot and a half from his face. He looks up toward "Thorgy." Like a rector intoning a service, Thorgersen's ecclesiastical basso booms the introduction, and then—"Floyd Gibbons. . . ." Thorgy's eyes flash a "shoot!" at the man in the chair, and . . .

"Hello, everybody!"

The broadcast is on.

Speed—that's Gibbons. His lips lay over a polysyllable with the ease they rim the glass of his chocolate ice cream soda. Only a "sick" mike can stop him.

"Thorgy's arm goes up at "——ingham."

"Wait a minute, Floyd; it's 'dead,'" he whispers.

The studio visitor leans forward. This

"break" augments the thrill of the broadcast for him.

The "mike" stares back, vacuous, like a face without eyebrows; dead as a bathroom wall.

Thorgy jiggles a gadget; gets a sign from the man in the glass enclosed control room, listens ——

"O. K."

And Floyd begins again, undismayed. Nothing fazes him.

Seven. It's over.

"S'long, Thorgy. S'long, Mac."

He grabs his coat and steps out for his own "office." M. H. Aylesworth, NBC head, set aside a room for him on the fifteenth floor. He all but fills the cubicle.

"You know there's a lesson in that 'dead' mike we had tonight," he said. "Sort of gives you some idea of how the other guy feels when you shoot a line of chatter at him he no comprenez pas.

"Trying to realize how the other guy feels is my principal aim in this broadcasting—the best mental approach I know. It's human beings I'm interested in—not [ironically] 'this great army of unseen listeners.'

"I don't want an audience to orate to. Gosh,

I hope I never get that professional. These listeners of mine are real people to me as I sit before the 'mike.' I'm just as conscious that I'm talking to them as that they are listening to me. I might say that the purpose of my talks is to convey to real people some experience that we all can share."

Thorgy came in. Got himself a drink of water.

"Tell 'em about the $4.50 Bob Lee owed you for a couple of years and how you were reminded of it," prompted Thorgy. "That was an experience."

Gibbons rumpled out the divan in the room; kicked off a pillow to the floor; eased the one at his head; lit a cigaret. Thorgy sank seven inches further in his chair. He flipped off the ceiling lights from the wall switch at his hand.

The story of the $4.50. . . .

It was June, but that made no difference to the Channel. The ship carrying General Pershing, Gibbons and the vanguard of the A. E. F. —"Pershing's own"—buffeted the worst crossing in years.

Floyd filed his story of the arrival, the hysterical reception of paupered, plague-torn Paris,

hung around a few weeks—and then disappeared.

The orders "to the front," nervously awaited for weeks, finally came. Febrile Paris spent itself in an orgy of excitement.

"Poor Gib," wailed the seventeen other accredited American correspondents, "he isn't here to move on up with us."

"It's the first scoop I ever knew him to miss," said one old-timer.

"Yeah," put in another, "but a hell of a ways up front we'll get. By Allah, I couldn't crash the Foreign Office gate yesterday. My office cabled to lay off those 'official' handouts they're passing us here. Say, they can get 'em cheaper—and quicker—in Washington."

Simultaneously the orders were received in a little town in Southern France, where an artillery corps had been in training. Lining up with the men daily, exactly as the "buck" next him, was "Private" Floyd Gibbons.

He'd guessed this outfit would be the first to "go up," and had obtained consent to his "watching and training."

Through the rut of what France called a "road" in 1917 artillery trucks coughed and spumed and creaked at dusk one rainy evening

in November of that year moving up toward the Luneville sector.

Huddled back of the road, watching, were seventeen correspondents, under official escort, waiting for the vanguard to pass.

One peered sharper at the outline of a figure beside the driver of a "75."

"Yay, Floyd, oh, Floyd!" he yelled.

The truck rumbled on.

"By God, that was Floyd Gibbons," cursed the shouter. "How the hell did he get away with that?"

"You're crazy," commented another. "Who do you think he is, Houdini?"

They trudged wearily into the battered town.

"Howdy, boys?" smiled Gibbons.

"Howdy, hell!" they came right back. "We're gonna squawk."

They did and Floyd was "detained" for forty-eight hours as a "penalty" for his crash. What hurt most was that he could obtain his release only on the promise that he wouldn't file a story of what he saw until a month later. The balked correspondents fixed that. Later there was an exchange of notes and the situation was eased.

His carte blanche from the Chicago Tribune

got Gibbons a fast car and chauffeur. With this adding the semblance of official swank to his dashes, he crashed many lines that ordinarily would have been barred to him.

And it was a busy time. The Germans were in the midst of their final desperate drive on Paris. It seemed they might succeed. The French government had moved to Bordeaux.

In the midst of this came word of a hot engagement at a town called Chateau-Thierry. Gibbons piled into his car with his escort, Lieutenant Hartzell, and told the chauffeur to step on it.

At Chateau-Thierry he found Major Benjamin S. Berry, and begged permission to continue to a point called Belleau Wood.

"It's damn hot up here, but you can come—at your own risk," barked the major.

"Let's go," said Gibbons.

Major Berry, Lieutenant Hartzell and Gibbons moved up over ground recovered but a few hours before by the Marines from Germans.

Shell holes stunk. They stumbled over bodies. A Marine raised himself on an arm before them.

"Yuh curazy?" he drawled, weakly. "Get the hell back, you damn fools!"

The three pushed on, dropping to hands and knees. Then Berry flattened out.

"It's all right," he told Gibbons and Hartzell. "I'm not hit—just cautious. There's a machine gun nest over there," pointing at an angle before them and a little to the right.

They crawled on, through the mud and filth into which shells had churned a fresh-tilled oatfield.

Berry's body quivered, was still.

"I got it now," he called. "O. K. It's only in the arm."

"Lie flatter, Major," called Gibbons. "I'll come over and help you."

Working his body with elbows and toes, Gibbons inched along. He couldn't hear the tapping of the machine guns—only hear the soft susurrus of the bullets. "Like a swarm of bees," Gibbons said. "It was a swell pastoral touch for that oatfield."

He was only a foot from the major. He raised himself—and a "bee" stung him. Right through the helmet, on, grazing his temple, on into his head, leaving his left eye lying on his cheek. Another "bee" got him in the arm—the fleshy part.

He lay there for three hours. Hartzell was helpless to proceed through the rain of steel.

Finally he got over to Gibbons and applied first aid. The major, able to walk, crept back with his two companions, Hartzell, in the middle, helping them along.

Back of the lines they dressed Gibbons' wounds, and sent him to American Base Hospital No. 1, at Neuilly.

"What'd it feel like?" they asked him.

"Just as though some one pressed a lit cigaret to my skin," he said.

"Gee," said his companion, "was that your only sensation? Why, a man that's had his eye shot out must experience something!"

"Sure," said Floyd, "giving" a blond nurse his right eye. "You know the thing that occurred to me after that bullet got me was the thought of how that chiseller, Bob Lee [his city editor back in Chicago], had put the bee on me for $4.50 and forgot about it." . . .

Floyd rose and lit a cigaret from Thorgy's match.

The "$4.50" story was over. You have to chisel it out of him; piece it together with a little third-party aid and not much imagination, and tell it yourself. The white linen bandage

over the left eye socket has to speak for itself and for the Croix de Guerre that is seldom worn.

"But I got back my $4.50," said Floyd, ankling out the door to dinner. "Bob paid me the first thing after I got back to Chicago—when I reminded him of it."

CHAPTER III

"The House of Magic" and Desert Sheiks

THE scene is the General Electric Laboratories in Schenectady. An attendant throws a switch and the blue-gold flash of a million volts crackles sulphurously.

Pause before a cabinet and you can see, electrically transmitted, the features of a companion in some other part of Building No. 5.

At your elbow is a spectrophotometer, a gadget that measures to a silken thread the color of milady's Deauville costume.

Delicate instruments that register to the millionth of an inch . . . sinister, powerful scopes whose greenish-tinged sparks message miracles . . . the cathode ray . . . high voltage-testing indicators . . . huge glass retorts, age-old symbols of alchemy . . .

Here magicians' dreams of the Middle Ages are realized. Here dross is turned to gold. Here stalk the Fausts of 1930—Dr. W. D. Coolidge, Dr. E. F. W. Alexanderson . . .

Here is Floyd Gibbons' "House of Magic."

Twice a week Gibbons moves north to this citadel of science to gather material for his weekly broadcasts for the General Electric hours Saturday nights over WEAF and allied NBC stations.

A layman, he marvels at the technique of these wizards, gets a load of their information, and then translates it to tell the world in plain talk of the wonders of modern invention.

He can take a spectrophotometer, or any other doodad with a nine dollar name, and make it sound as simple as a custard pie to a rancher's wife tuning in from the Dakotas.

"I am only capitalizing scientific ignorance," said Gibbons.

"My ignorance of technical subjects is the ignorance of the average layman. The General Electric experts take me by the hand and beat into my skull just what they are trying to do. They've got to do this, got to give it to me right so that I can get it over for my listeners.

"I'm indebted to a lot of men up there. They have much patience with me. Dr. Coolidge is a marvel at explaining things. So are Dr. Alexanderson, Larry Hawkins and Mr. Manning. I take a Cook's tour of those laboratories, and

when I come out I'm armed with information that I must get right off my chest. It's a wonderful experience.

"As a matter of fact, I'd always been interested in scientific development. Guess I got it from my dad. He was a mile-a-minute marvel himself in Washington, D. C., where I was born.

"But I broke into the newspaper business soon after I quit Georgetown University, and since that time I've never stayed sufficiently put to proceed with my inclination toward technical work. What a whale of an engineering scientist the world lost!

"But, kidding aside, those G. E. works are an eye-opener for what is going on in this little old world of ours. I get the thrill of my life every time I go up there. Each visit they show me something new. I suppose today when I shoot up they'll have figured out some instrument for counting the sands of the desert."

"You counted them once yourself, didn't you, Mr. Gibbons?" put in Mrs. Marian Nesbit, his secretary and right hand "man."

Did he count them? He lost them.

It started back in 1923, when Mrs. E. M. Hull's "The Sheik" was searing the hands of

the country's flappers. The desert saga interested Colonel Robert McCormick, of the Chicago Tribune.

"Go down into the desert," he cabled Gibbons, in Paris, "and see what it's all about. Live with those sheiks; size up their women; expose or extol their vaunted sex appeal; cross the Sahara as the Arabians have done for a thousand years—by caravan. Carry the flag to Timbuctoo by camel, something no other American has ever done."

"Go to Timbuctoo!" The words carried a familiar ring sounding back 4,000 miles and sixteen years to the city room of the Minneapolis Daily News and to the desk of William G. Shepherd, city editor.

"Where'll I go, Mr. Shepherd?" Gibbons, a cub reporter, had asked.

"You can go to hell or Timbuctoo for all I care," Shepherd had said, firing him for muffing a story. Well . . .

The Algiers boat crunched against her wharf in Marseilles harbor February 17, 1923. Gibbons chucked his bags at a steward and turned to his mother, Mrs. Emma Phillips Gibbons.

"Goodby, son, and take these with you.

You'll have need of them in the blistering sun." She pressed six lipsticks into his hand.

"Good Lord, mother! Take 'em away!"

But the maternal will was strong, and to appease her Gibbons shoved the package into his pocket—"the luckiest thing I ever did," he said. "I don't know where mother got the information, but you'll find out how correct it was and how necessary."

In Algiers he bought most of his equipment, sewed up arrangements for aid from the French military station at Colomb Bechard—last civilized post on the desert border, 2,000 miles as the camel grunts from his destination—Timbuctoo.

Who but a newspaper man would want to go to Timbuctoo? Village of fat, oiled, ill-smelling natives, of thatched huts and tom-toms, of witchcraft, of sheathed knives whose scabbards gaped all too quickly at the pull of a deft hand, of war-like Touareg tribes infesting its outskirts, whose men were veiled and hennaed their nails and hair, but who'd carve the belly of a neighbor as nonchalantly as you'd lay your lip over an aperitif.

"That's what you got when you reached Timbuctoo," said Gibbons. "Oh, it was one

swell town, and what a swell time we had getting there."

Ringside weight, 170; in the full vigor of a 100 per cent constitution, Gibbons set out for Timbuctoo. He arrived, weighing 135, including a full beard, one blue eye slightly dimmed by the scorching sun, three days ahead of his schedule.

Out of Colomb Bechard they moved in March, twenty-five swaying camels carrying Gibbons, his photographer, Drucker, his maps, his compass and his native guides and men out into the sea of sand, the Stars and Stripes waving from the hump of the outrider's beast.

Some 800 miles out, their canteens ran dry. For five days the camels had been without water. Restless, ill-natured, they sounded their whines and growls into the night.

In this region, the Tanezrouft, there is but one well for 500 square miles. Geographers call it the driest spot in the world.

Hourly prayers mounted to Allah from the Arabs. Hourly the party, circling in forays, met and thrust their hands toward heaven in deprecation. All search had been futile, hope almost abandoned. They had lost the oasis.

Off against the horizon Gibbons discerned a

small, black speck. They sped toward it. It was the well, but almost dry. Feverishly they dug for half a day. Their labor yielded half a barrel of water. The well would take another forty-eight hours to fill again.

A camel, tortured with thirst, kicked away the frenzied, parched men in his eagerness to get to the water hole and fell into it, stopping the supply, delaying their progress. They would have left the beast there had they not been short of camels. Many had died in the long trek across the sandy wastes.

With intense labor the camel was removed and eventually their canteens and goatskin bags were filled. They proceeded to the capital of the Touaregs, Tamnanrasset, 6,000 feet above sea level in the Hoggar Mountains.

Gibbons presented his credentials. King Ammanuk no savvy white man's talk-talk. Gibbons brought out his Woolworth gewgaws—five-cent glassware, ten-cent tinsels. They were friends.

In the strangest written language in the world, a script that is not Arabic nor Sanskrit and is still to be wholly decoded, King Ammanuk presented Gibbons a passport whose weirdly drawn characters were to carry him on safely through the mountain fastnesses.

And in the same script His Majesty offered another parchment—to His Majesty the King of the United States, "wishing that his flocks would increase, his children multiply, his mutton be always tender and that he might always have that priceless element of the desert—water."

"Harding's death prevented me from delivering the message," Gibbons explained. He still has the parchment, a sweat-soaked, creased and soiled bit of kidskin, memento of his caravan tour.

Near Tamnanrasset is the desert's holy shrine—the graves of General Laparine, French hero who perished in the sands, and Pere Foucauld, French priest who ministered to and was loved by the Touaregs. He was stabbed to death by his water boy while on a pilgrimage of mercy.

There Gibbons placed the tokens of remembrance of a grateful civilization.

"Great White Marabout," ran the script on the wreath laid at the foot of Father Foucauld's cross, "you give us faith that the days of holy men have not gone. By your life and by your death you give us new courage for the days to come, new hope in the hereafter. . . ."

With this text in mind Gibbons and his party carried on through the blistering sun in temperatures of from 115 to 145 degrees Fahrenheit, temperatures that exploded some of their canned goods.

Gibbons' lips blistered and cracked, his fever mounted almost to the heat of the sun—the Sahara disease, sun fever.

He reached in his pocket one day for his handkerchief. A small soiled package met his fingers. It contained the lipsticks pressed in his hands by his mother at the Marseilles dock.

He reddened his parched lips with them. The substance was soothing; soon his lips healed. Daily thereafter he applied the pseudo medication as a preventive—"but not after we left Timbuctoo, honest," he said. "I chucked the rest in the Niger."

A ragged band of sand blistered strollers, their caravan halted just out of Timbuctoo on July 1, while the French officials came out to greet them.

"Don't tell me you can't raise anything in the desert," cracked Drucker. "Look at our beards!" The luxurious human hay descending from their chins outrivalled a chief of the House of David.

Officials were cordial. The American flag Gibbons had carried was strung above the Palais de Justice.

"I looked around, and for the first time in our three months' jaunt nearly passed out," said Floyd. "There she waved in the breeze—Old Glory—upside down. The native thought she looked better that way."

Drucker went back with his camera. Gibbons sighted south. At Bammakko the wireless station passed him word that he had been awarded the Ribbon of the Legion of Honor for his war record. But Paris and its formalities seemed far away in the face of the desert's rigors. The jungle beckoned. . . .

And that, my friends, is the saga of Gibbons' nonsensical flight to Timbuctoo. A woman who had never been out of England wrote a "hot" novel about what great lovers and what handsome, strong men the sheiks of the desert were. And American maids and matrons were gobbling this goo up. A newspaper publisher who ought to have known better ordered Gibbons, at great cost, to trek the desert in search of sheiks and report on them. Sheiks are about as inspiring as fish peddlers and are much dirtier. The expedition was a bust and served only to

advertise, gratis, a cheap, sensational book. But with Gibbons it was "his not to reason why; his but to do or die" on a newspaper assignment. And, besides, Gibbons proved he could raise a beard.

CHAPTER IV

A Full Day and General Smuts

IT AMUSES Floyd Gibbons, in "signing off" his midnight broadcast to listeners beyond the Mississippi, to conclude with a snappy, teasing "signature."

". . . and I'll buzz around this old town for a handful of hot bulletins for you folks west of the river . . . it's a sleepy time now . . . my mattress is calling . . . so, until tomorrow, hay, hay."

His mattress may be calling, but the call is sure to go unheeded. Gibbons' day practically starts after his midnight broadcast.

His secretary, Mrs. Marian Nesbit, plots his day for him; a day that will give him a night's rest. Her routine never holds.

Descending from the studio to the lobby of the NBC building at 711 Fifth Avenue the first editions of the morning papers greet him. He buys a stack, boards a cab and proceeds to his apartment.

Paintings, photos, his own "snaps" mount the walls, picturing his travels. A small globe ornaments the table; another, larger, in relief, stands in a corner alongside shelf upon shelf of reference books.

A boy knocks with his midnight supper and finds Gibbons flipping the pages of the newspapers, a pencil stub checking stories which must be watched for development by the afternoon journals. He insists that his radio bulletins be "hot."

They must have action; must be "humanized"; they must be "exciting."

"Excitement," says Floyd, "is news. I find out what interests me in the news. I take an incident and try to dramatize it into a human story, sticking to the facts, and with one rule above all others—simplicity.

"My attitude on the air is that of one who has information that is so important that I've got to get it right off to you. This is the feeling I have. I'm something like a reporter telling his city editor about a story.

"You know how you shoot it in, the high spots; that's all a city editor wants to know—'two dead, gas on, a note.' He wants a vivid, realistic description, the important facts, and

wants it quick. That's the way I try to put my stuff out over the air. My news training in this respect has been of excellent help to me."

He moves to the table, a paper propped up before a lamp, and munches a sandwich. Clips and notations make a pile at his right. These are left for his secretary in the morning. He retires for a few hours' sleep.

At 11 A. M. he rises and wades through his mail; 300 letters a day. "Don't call it 'fan' mail," he said. "These are my friends. Their criticisms, suggestions, help put over the broadcasts." No time to ride, his favorite relaxation, he shoves into his coat as Mrs. Nesbit arrives, and tramps over to Central Park for an hour's exercise.

Back, his appointment slate is complete. There are sessions with the Literary Digest editors; latest reports of the prohibition poll to be analyzed.

Then, from 3 to 6 P. M., "I lock myself up, muffle the telephone and go to it—3,000 words for my quarter hour. It's a jungle fastness for me. No cable can get past my door now. . . ."

Which, naturally, gives an interviewer a chance to ask about a cable which reached Gib-

bons in 1923 in Africa, after his long trek across the Sahara to Timbuctoo.

From Timbuctoo a native boat had carried him to Bammakoo, capital of the French Soudan, supposedly on his way home.

"Un despatch pour M. Gibbons." It had lain there a month, waiting. The attendant passed over the radio message from the Chicago Tribune's office:

"Proceed to Cape Town stop visit all ports west coast stop get into jungle stop check up on clause quote C unquote Versailles treaty for violations unfavorable America."

The old passport to new climes; the theme song of the correspondent—"Get ready; you're moving!"

A few hundred miles over blasted country lay Kayes and the Senegal, sluggish stream whose mouth was Dakar, once the word for a pleasant farewell.

"Aw, what the hell," mused Gibbons. "Cape Town's a sizable village. Let's give this jungle the once over, eh, Aiasa?"

But Aiasa, he no savvy. He sick. Aiasa have "misery in belly." The ill native guide, faithful "liaison" official between Gibbons and his tribal aides, must be repatriated to Algeria. There he

was sent—to die in his desert, Floyd learned later.

At Kayes another boat was chartered. Six husky swarthies, stinking from their body oil, "signed up" for the voyage to Dakar. Down the Senegal. The poling was easy; they were with the current.

"To hell with hurrying. Hurry in that sun? God, you couldn't breathe the air," said Floyd. "A blast furnace at Gary. You've seen that flame shooting skyward passing the plant on the New York Central. . . . Get the idea?"

A reddening dawn summoned the tenth day. Through the rising mist the shoreline loomed dimly, a reeking miasma. The half dozen blacks muttered gutturals discontentedly. Food was plenty; water low. The Senegal was poison.

A pole was withdrawn. The native hurled it to the dew-soaked deck, slipped over the shiny planking and lay down beside a hatch.

The gutturals rose to a chant. Here was a new fever. Mutiny?

Alone in the stern Gibbons watched each move, his one eye flashing, a Cyclops breasting to the challenge.

"Hey, you!" Rising, he moved toward the recalcitrant hand. Off, beyond the shore, the

"bong" of a tom-tom sounded; smoke curled up behind a jungle clump. A village was rising.

"Boy! Was I glad I had that three months' growth of beard!" said Gibbons. "It sure covered the pallor that would have shown through my sun-tanned skin. But I couldn't let 'em know I was scared."

Like the wrath of Allah he stood over the grunting native, who had also risen, gorilla chest heaving. The native turned toward the call of a companion, stood a second, his gleaming back a ripple of sweat.

"Get the hell back to that pole!" . . . Pointing.

"I put everything I had into it, bawling it out with every ounce of breath I had. I was nowheres near my gun. And luck? We struck something then. A stump, maybe a 'gator, I don't know. But it toppled this bird into the water. His plight made a swell recovery. The rest of the crew laughed, pointing, gesticulating at the black in the water.

"I had to laugh myself. It relieved a tense situation. But it wasn't so funny to the poor devil in the water. Swimming around with 'gators for playmates is a graveyard joke. We

fished him out and he was so damn grateful he went right back to his oar and I never had any more trouble."

At Dakar Gibbons boarded a coastwise vessel for the Congo. "I got tired of fooling around with the hippos and beat it on down the coast to carry out my assignment."

The "C" clause of the Versailles treaty requires each country supervising a mandated German colony to permit the entrance of American goods on the same tariff basis as that of the country holding the mandate.

It was a job checking at this port; enquiring at that. At Walvis Bay there was luck. Formerly Togoland, the German colony had been turned over to the Union of South Africa by the dignitaries sitting at Versailles.

"There," said Floyd, "I found that American autos were being delivered over the border from Cape Town for the obvious purpose of reselling with the duty tacked on. I didn't think there was any reason why they couldn't have been shipped direct.

"I went on down to Cape Town. It was a hell of a hot day in January, but I started direct for the government offices, to the quarters of Gen-

eral Jan Smuts, one of the most lovable and most brilliant statesmen I have ever met.

" 'General,' I said, 'I've travelled 11,000 miles to get the goods on you.' And then I told him of what I had discovered in Togoland.

" 'Son,' he said, 'you've sure got a story. And now I'm going to break your heart. I'm going to refund those revenues and kill your story.'

"A great man, Smuts. This had been going on without his knowledge. Indeed, possibly the traders themselves didn't know that they were guilty of any violation. Smuts did refund the money. It didn't amount to much—a few thousands.

"It was the only story I ever was glad I lost. It would be hard to challenge Smuts. First, you wouldn't want to; second, you'd probably get trimmed in the end."

The voyage back to London. No Cyrano contemplated the magic of Cockaigne more avidly. Floyd won the chess tournament aboard the vessel. The prize was an order on the ship's barber for a guinea's worth of shaves.

"But I wasn't cutting off the hay I'd accumulated until I showed mother what a crop I could raise." He cashed the order. "But I had him

trim it up. Boy, you should have seen the boulevardier Van Dyke I had."

London—and on to Paris. After a year's absence he barged into the Chicago Tribune's office to add one more sheaf to his volume of a score of pilgrimages.

CHAPTER V

His Audience and Arrest in Russia

THE little shack on the Nebraska plains squats low in its cottonwood shelter, unseen by the club car passengers speeding on the limited west toward Denver.

Hank trudges in from the barn wearily; clanks his milk pails at the kitchen door as he has for twenty-six of his thirty-six years. He pauses and looks back west at the train—yearning. The sun sets. Night falls.

Hank butts open the kitchen door with his elbow. His wife looks up stolidly, round arms floured from her pan of dough. She would have scored in the nineties when plump was a pleasing feminine term.

The ritual of a thousand similar suppers begins—pork and potatoes. Shoeless, Hank reaches for the Punkton weekly; gazes dully at the paragraph personals that make up its news —"Lem Smith was up from Hayville last week." . . . Folks he and his wife have known

through the years they have existed. No further than a flivver's jaunt to town have they been. For aught they know Voliva is right.

In a half hour another day, like 10,000 others Hank has known, will have ended. He shuffles to the battery set in the front room—their one wonder; their magic carpet—and dials in an NBC associate station in Omaha. Flanked by six kids they listen, transported. . . .

"He was a tough hombre, that Zulu, but they got him. Those bolo knives zip quick and sure and clean. . . . Well, folks, keep the old coffee pot boiling. I'll breeze around your way again next week with another whopper. Yes, sir, a true one. . . ."

The rainbow's end. Floyd Gibbons has been hunting headlines with Mr. and Mrs. Hank. Through him their radio becomes a "magic casement opening on the foam of perilous seas. . . ."

Hank's and a million others. From all over the country the letters flock in to Gibbons; appreciations of shut-ins and stay-at-homes, like Mr. and Mrs. Hank, for an evening's adventure; for the vicarious thrill they have had to be in at the death of that mad Zulu; for the

excitement of moving up into the line with a regiment.

Tubercular overseas boys at Evergreen, Col., flock to the village store to hear Floyd. "Last night we had eight," wrote the grocer, "all of whom wanted me to tell you how much they like your tales of the front."

From the Veterans' Hospital, Fort Snelling, Minn., comes a note of thanks and "I served with the First Division and I hope that some day when you get around to it you'll tell about the hardest day's work we ever did—the parade in New York City after we returned."

From Milledgeville, Ill., comes the plaint at the temporary cessation of the "Headline" hour: "We were sorry to hear you tell us that you wouldn't 'be around to our house' for several weeks. But when you come we'll have the coffee hot and the easy chair ready so don't fail to show up."

A Western mother rises to defend Floyd's occasional use of army expletives:

"We like your bad words. Don't let any of those old maids bluff you out of using words MEN use. We like 'em 'cause they make it real when you take us to France . . ."

Mr. and Mrs. —— of Buffalo are blind.

"But my wife is an expert housekeeper and an excellent cook," the husband writes. "Drop in at your earliest opportunity and get proof thereof. Perhaps you do not realize what your vivid descriptions mean to us. I think we get more out of your talks than most sighted people . . ."

Women write him about their jams and jellies. He's always getting bids to drop in "and have a cup of coffee." Men write him about their boats and their gardens and their golf scores. From institutions and homes they flock in; 2,500 letters a day is his average. Some are critical. Those he examines specially for what they may offer to improve his talks.

Poland, 1920.

Budienny, that young hell-for-breakfast riding officer of the Bolshevik cavalry, had marshalled every moving unit of the Red army and started to take a sock at Pilsudski.

Drunk with the overthrow of the Romanoff house, the Russians surged on back of Budienny, driving the Polish general to the very walls of Warsaw and beyond into Prussia.

"It looked as though they were going right on through to the Channel," said Gibbons. "I

was in Berlin at the time and hurried to Warsaw."

He saw an utter rout. Pilsudski's demoralized forces had scattered, yielding an unhampered route to Budienny's army now snapping at their heels.

The Red army was stripping the country of everything; laying it waste.

"I never saw such utter destructions; such wanton disregard of property; such fierce abandonment," Gibbons continued. "Human emotions had fevered to a point that had made the Bolos frenzied devils.

"Of course, the allied liaison officers had been reporting the extent of the hostilities to their several governments. But reinforcements were slow in arriving and meanwhile Budienny pushed forward."

It was a night and day progression.

Correspondents swarming the Polish frontier were barred from proceeding. Not specifically because they couldn't get credentials. It was more due to the fact that there was no organization of sufficient authority to issue them so loosely were the various headquarters functioning in that bitter drive.

Gibbons' fast car and chauffeur with which

his newspaper, the Chicago Tribune, had equipped him, his natural "brass" in accosting officers, helped, with some lucky "breaks," to get him into the lines.

Where were the Allies with their reinforcements? They knew about the imminent danger of the situation. Already the Germans had interned thousands of Poles and Bolos alike directly pursued and pursuer slipped into Prussia.

Gibbons shot out a yarn, an eye-witness story of the rout. Followed it with others emphasizing the peril to the peace that had hardly been concluded with Germany and the world; dispatches "hot," like his radio bulletins.

"The scenes were frightful," said Gibbons. "I think the destruction gripped me most. It was as intense a picture of the horror and misery of war as I had observed in any theatre of the European conflict.

"It was a kaleidoscopic view of frustrated humanity. Throughout Poland and the Russian border indescribable scenes of misery greeted the onlooker. Caucasian types, some primitive; shoeless, toothless old men; men in their ripe manhood; boys; women from hags to maidens, yielding, grovelling in the face of the advance.

"Wearied, straggling refugees sought avidly

any shelter; gnawed on crusts or hungrily clutched at the driest bones. Railroad yards were clogged with trains; vehicles long since had been burned for warmth or merely for the sake of destruction. Not a wheel moved. It was utter, desolate despair."

Then the French acted. News of the rout had been bared to the world through Gibbons' and others' despatches. Von Weygand had been sent from Paris with an army.

He gathered up Pilsudski's remnants and, with the Poles reorganized, proceeded to counterattack. Soon the Reds were driven back across the Polish frontier. Poland had been saved; and Gibbons went to Paris.

Not for long, though. Russia, demoralized, long had felt the pinch. Reports, rumors of the entire land starving filtered out. Accurate information of the rumored famine couldn't be had because of the strict Soviet censorship.

Gibbons placed a half dozen of his men from Paris along the Russian frontier in the hopes that they would crash the line. They were balked at each point.

Gibbons chartered a plane and flew to Riga—and was arrested for landing without a visa. They let him go, though watching his hotel.

There he stayed, day after day. Finally a representative of the Foreign Office called. It was "suggested" that Gibbons visit the Ambassador, Litvinoff.

"There's a baby to play poker with," said Gibbons. "I'll match him as a shrewd calculating diplomat against most of the schooled Europeans."

Out-smarting Litvinoff isn't done; unless you get the breaks.

Gibbons went to the Embassy and was shown before "his Excellency."

"What is your purpose here?" asked Litvinoff.

"I want to go to Moscow to get the exact dope on Soviet conditions," said Gibbons.

"You'll be arrested if you do."

"That didn't occur to me," said Gibbons.

"And why," asked Litvinoff, mockingly, "didn't it 'occur to you?' "

"Because," said Gibbons, "a clever official like you wouldn't arrest an American citizen at this time; just on the eve of the first food shipments from the Hoover Commission."

Litvinoff stared coldly, calculatingly.

"It happens," he said, "that I myself am

going to Moscow tomorrow. You might, if it's convenient, be my guest in my private car."

Litvinoff was as good as his word. They went to Moscow the next day, "and I filed a long series of eye-witness stories about the famine," added Gibbons.

"I guess the old boy knew what he was doing after all. The misery I saw was awful. The famine actually exceeded reports of conditions we had been receiving. I like to think that my stories of the frightful situation assisted in spurring the relief that this and other nations sent."

CHAPTER VI

Broadcasting from the Air and Among the Riffs

TEN, 15,000 feet up the plane hovers. Alert, the pilot swoops, circles back over the lines to safety, avoiding the enemy craft the indicator on his instrument board has "sighted."

Below are a million gas-masked robots—fantastic, sinister mockeries of Dave Montgomery's tin man—civilians and belligerents costumed alike as protection against the deadly hanging vapors.

Beside the pilot is another robot, more sinister; a synthetic, diabolical insect, spawn of the War College laboratory. Antennae loop up and out from the helmet that incloses his head. A cone like a hello girl's transmitter fits airtight into his mask. His belt is jewelled with push buttons, dials, gadgets.

They have landed. The robot destroys an electrical contact and the flare of shells, the spit of gas bombs, fade from the television

screens above a hundred million radios throughout the world. . . .

Floyd Gibbons' image of a 1980 war correspondent. In this manner will his bulletins of an engagement be broadcast.

"It's an uncomfortable setting for the idea," said Gibbons. "Let's turn it around to a better picture. A great international spectacle; some beautiful, friendly demonstration, can and will be perhaps within two years picturized by television and radio by this new model electrical reporter."

Part of the prediction already has been proved. At Lakehurst, in August last year, Gibbons demonstrated the first "knapsack broadcasting station"—a transmitting set compact and light enough to be carried around. Two men followed him at the field toting ten-foot poles to which the aerial was fitted. The entire outfit weighed but thirty pounds by which Gibbons "reported" the arrival of the Zeppelin.

"Experts now are working on the 'field' plant we used," continued Gibbons. "It will be simplified soon so that the roving broadcasting equipment can be handled as a one-man job.

"But don't get the idea that radio will ever displace the newspaper. Telegraphy hasn't put

the post office out of business, has it? Radio will always be a most powerful and interesting adjunct to the press. But radio's appeal, though essentially dramatic, is as ephemeral as speech. We must always have the printed record."

The printed record. It sounded flat. But it can read dramatically, as Gibbons has proved in his newspaper stories filed from the corners of the world. His stuff has the action of the cabled office instructions, "Get ready; you're moving!" that again greeted him upon his return to Paris from Cape Town in 1924.

"I had classified all my notes to get busy on my desert story," said Gibbons, "when the old cable came in. Many times I had picked up the MS. to finish it, only to be thwarted. It seems as though fate has decreed that I shall never write this experience. It's still lying, an incomplete script, in my trunk."

In a fortnight he was sailing out of San Francisco bound for Sydney. Here in America La Follette was campaigning against Harding, urging the Australian labor government then as the basis for an American system.

"My purpose was to see how this kind of government worked," explained Gibbons, "and I cabled a series of stories on my observations.

"From Australia I went to Singapore to visit the British naval base there. It's not completely built yet. But I saw what it meant—at least what it meant to me—the rallying point for any British operations in the Pacific.

"Singapore's a great town. Color? It's like a sunset chromo of some gifted sign painter. Funny thing to go into an opium den there and set up a pill all around, a sort of 'see what the boys in the back room'll have.' Families'll send over a boy for a pot o' hop much in the way the 'can' used to be rushed here.

"Then I went on to Manila. In the Philippines I filed about 25,000 words altogether on conditions there. I didn't find that they were ready for independence. I said then that if they were granted freedom of government there'd be a war in six months.

"I still think the situation there is precarious. We must have our finger on the pulse of the Pacific constantly."

He reached Hong Kong—and ran into a war; 4,000 miles away, through the old "moving on" cable. It was there that his previous association with Litvinoff became advantageous.

The Riffs were raising hell in Africa. Abd-el-

Krim, with his handful of guerillas, was holding the French and Spanish at bay from his desert fastnesses.

"I was ordered to cover the fighting," Gibbons went on. "From China it would shorten my passage by six weeks if I could go over Siberia and proceed through Russia. But the Soviet embassy in Shanghai, where I had gone, refused permission."

No argument could prevail with the Soviet Minister. Gibbons was stumped. Then he recalled the Litvinoff episode. The Foreign Minister had admitted to him that his cabled reports of the Russian famine had done much to bring world aid to the starving country.

He went to a cable office and filed a message to Litvinoff recalling the situation. Litvinoff replied directly:—"Office has instructions, proceed," read the Soviet diplomat's cable.

"I went back to the Foreign Office and they all but rolled down the carpet for me," said Gibbons. "It was a swell break and I started for the trans-Siberian railway that night."

In another fortnight he was in French Morocco, describing the skirmishes and battle scenes by plane. The Riffs had no such equip-

ment; no anti-aircraft guns to pot them. It was pretty safe.

Gibbons took up with a French officer and started reconnoitering with an auto. They had proceeded twenty miles into Riff territory. Above French planes were scouting.

"To hell with this," yelled Gibbons to the officer, "let's get out on foot." The car had reached an impassable road. "Nothing'll happen. The Riffs won't shoot. They wouldn't dare. It would give away their position to the planes above. They're wise enough to know this."

The pair left the car and proceeded a hundred yards when a hail of bullets stopped them. The French officer was hit in the arm. They dashed back to the car, bullets nicking its rear as they stepped on the gas back to their lines.

"The old car was pretty well sieved up, but they never got us," said Gibbons, "except for the slight flesh wound of my companion. Another lucky break."

But not all his "breaks" were lucky. He was summoned back to Paris. Arrived there too late to see his mother die. Gibbons, his brother, Edward, and his father, Edward T. Gibbons, brought her body home on the Republic in De-

cember, 1925. She is buried in Washington, D. C.

There has been little roaming since as Gibbons knows the term. But the old wanderlust gets into the blood. You're never cured.

Today he is planning his Western Hemisphere Trail that is to blaze a land route from Tierra del Fuego to Nome. You can't convince Gibbons it can't be done. He has the State Department permits to try.

"Our organization will comprise a motor caravan of some thirty units with forty men, trained technicians, experts and scientists," said Gibbons. "We'll blaze a trail north to lead through every capital. Every government whose territory we shall cross has agreed to aid and will furnish us guides.

"It will be under official escort. It will connect up existing roads and cross the Andes. In northern Colombia there is a sub-sea swamp. This won't faze us. We'll build a road if we have to float it.

"Boy! When our expedition crosses the Isthmus, passes on through Mexico and into Texas and trundles up later to the White

House to greet the President we shall have the exact data, the photographic proof and the engineering information necessary so that we will know where the roadless gaps between the trails must be connected to preserve our route.

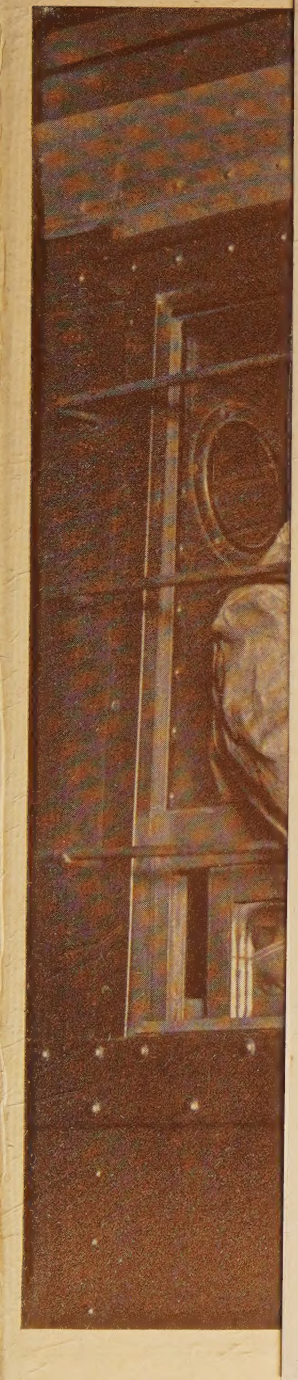
"Chaining up these links will give us an economic trade route, in my estimation, of remarkable value. There's no reason why such a highway shouldn't exist.

"The British get into Africa, cross the desert and jungle by autos. So do the French. It seems strange the Isthmus passage has never been attempted by us in America so far as I know. It would shorten the route between Buenos Aires and Rio by something like a week."

Maps, charts, models, some equipment already clutter his apartment for the venture. He won't stay put. A born nomad, New York, Chicago, can't hold him for long. Across the seas strange places in far off lands beckon. To Gibbons they are friendly advances from familiar settings.

He's sure to meet that chap again in Shanghai with whom he swapped yarns leaning against the rail of a China coast schooner.

"Get ready! You're moving!" A command? It's a siren's song.



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FLOYD GIBBONS

KNIGHT OF THE AIR

By DOUGLAS GILBERT

FLOYD GIBBONS is a welcome guest in millions of American homes. Daily he breezes in, through the medium of the loud speaker, and gives to his listeners, in dynamic fashion, a pithy resumé of the day's news from all over the world. His forceful personality projects itself right into your living room. It is immediately apparent that his exuberence is genuine, the natural bubbling-over of a man who lives at top speed and finds life good.

BEFORE taking up radio as a profession Gibbons crowded more adventures into his life, than are contained in a dozen thrillers. As a war correspondent the wide world has been his backyard. He led a caravan from Cairo to Timbuctoo: he lost an eye in the thick of the Arogonne fighting: he entered Soviet Russia without a passport in the days of the famine; he was repeatedly under fire while covering the Riff campaign in Morocco. Always he came through—and with the news he had been sent to get! It would be hard to imagine a career more packed with dramatic incidents.

GIBBONS quick rise to nation-wide popularity was no accident, but the merited recognition of a brilliant and colorful figure.

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